

QUT Digital Repository:
<http://eprints.qut.edu.au/>



Duffield, Lee R. (2009) *Historical and Personal Perspectives on the Fall of the Berlin Wall, 1989: address to 20th anniversary forums*. In: Berlin Wall Anniversary: Commemorative Event, 9 November, 2009, Centre for Independent Studies, St Leonard's, Sydney. (Unpublished)

© Copyright 2009 please contact the author

Historical and Personal Perspectives on the Fall of the Berlin Wall

Lee Duffield PhD, Senior Lecturer in Journalism, Queensland University of Technology

Address to the Centre for Independent Studies, Sydney, 9.11.09

The story of the fall of the Berlin Wall was an aspect of the “**imagination gap**” that we had to wrestle with as journalists covering the collapse of the Eastern Bloc in Europe.

I was the ABC European Correspondent at the time, based at Brussels, and found that, as so many of the old certainties and habituated landmarks of life were crumbling, it was scarcely possible to believe what you found yourself reporting.

The experience developed into a fascination with the phenomenon of the almost unthinkable coming true, such sweeping social change in a short time, that it developed into my doctoral project, completed in 2002, and then the book published this year, *Berlin Wall in the News*, an “academic” publication from VDM publishers in Germany.

Reporting the events in question was a **two-track process**. On one hand a mass social movement was dictating the pace and direction of events; on the other, the institutional business of politics as usual, to provide a framework for all the change that was happening, had to be managed – and reported on.

Where did the change come from in Eastern Europe?

The short answer to my investigations is that the source of that change was **the failure of the Soviet Union**, and I am pleased to say, after reviewing 5297 reports, published in elite media outlets between July 1989 and January 1990, that the news media got the story right. Present-day consensus on the history of the Wall is in accord with the contemporary coverage. (My work has also included extended interviews with correspondents who took part in that coverage, for the 2002 dissertation, and review of histories that were appearing a decade after the “Wall”).

Poland has been a contender for the honour of starting the process of change. The visit of the Polish Pope in 1979 saw an assertion of civil society, where citizens attended to crowd control, and ostentatiously, and literally turned their backs on the state police. Economic failures brought forward the Solidarity free trade union movement, and after a fresh crisis in 1988, it brought the communist party to the round table.

Out of the negotiations, came the agreement to hold free elections, on 4 and 18.6.89, in which the government party would be given a “start” in the form of a bloc of pre-allocated seats. However it was unable to win the three seats it needed to retain a majority of the joint Houses, the Sejm and Senate, and so, lost government. It is a comment on the weakened state of civil society, that by their own accounts, no party knew enough of

electoral politics to realise what would happen in the country's prevailing dire circumstances; to be prepared for a communist party defeat.

The spotlight immediately turned to the reformist leader of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev. He congratulated the winners. All of Eastern Europe watched keenly, and noted, that the USSR would not intervene, and saw the parties in Poland set up over a period of months, a government actually headed and controlled by non-communist members.

On the day of the first round of voting, the Tienanmen Square massacre occurred in Beijing. In my own case, this meant the story which, dubiously we thought might be the beginning of the end of the Eastern Bloc, would be relegated for a time out of the headlines. A massive transport accident in Russia, and the death of the Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran, also contributed to the displacing of the Polish milestone, in the media's "first draft of history".

Hungary was a contender for the role of catalyst for the change. After 1956, the communist party there had moved over the decades to a moderated style of government, its so-called Goulash Communism, so that in 1989 a reform faction was emboldened to take control, and opened the frontier with Austria. The "Iron Curtain" was breached, and hundreds of thousands of East Germans began their exodus, driving their Trabants through neighbouring states, into Austria and then West Germany.

October in East Berlin. That brought us to the crucial time, 7.10.89 in East Berlin, and the German Democratic Republic's attempt to celebrate its fortieth anniversary. The exodus of citizens, and workers, was making a mockery of the anniversary, by beginning to bankrupt the country, and robbing the government of any moral authority to hold office.

I was among hundreds of Western news correspondents let into East Germany for the "celebrations"; of course taking the opportunity to assess generally conditions on the other side of the wall; and witnessing and broadcasting the demonstrations that broke out. The scene was set for the opening of the Wall, on 9.11.89.

From the journalists' perspective, it looked like a wave of change rolling towards the Soviet Union, and the idea, against all habits of thought, that the Soviet state itself would be undermined. Again, the imagination gap came into play and invoked caution in reporting what seemed to be taking place. In reality the flow was the other way; the collapse of the Soviet Union was already well advanced and affecting the developments in Europe.

Soviet decline. Gorbachev had embarked on his policy of reasonableness and reform, to try to save the USSR. The Soviet Union was in extreme crisis. The economy – badly unbalanced, weighted against consumer production -- was burdened heavily by military spending equal to the United States, but on the base of a far smaller economy. Also, as Gorbachev said repeatedly, it was being bankrupted also by crises – the Chernobyl

nuclear accident, and the massive earthquake in Armenia – and by oil prices that remained low, for one reason or another, over a protracted period. Whereas the Soviet Union had achieved Nikita Krushchev's goal of equalling the USA in heavy industrial production, the West had moved on to newer and more efficient forms of production. The advent of computers had enabled a vast liberalisation of finance industries, and creation of new wealth, which the USSR could not match. Personal computers of course were a great challenge also because of the cultural and political factors involved in releasing such a communicative force into general society. In its deteriorated state, the Soviet Union was unable to raise capital for investment and restoration.

Gorbachev's government sought to remove its burden through drastic cuts in military spending and going to the West for investment. This required amelioration with the West, and so we saw, and would follow the Gorbachev "road show" in Western Europe and the United States – the Soviet leader proclaiming his commitment to the "common European home". In these circumstances – making large concessions on armaments, and seeking financial salvation – he would not support the Eastern European "satellite" governments if they could not stand on their own feet, in the face of public rejection.

Gorby, save us! So we return to East Berlin at the start of October 1989, with Mikhail Gorbachev in town as guest of honour for the anniversary. He was presented as endorsing the communist system in power in East Germany, and this interpretation had to be given credence even as contrary evidence became plain. He had let Poland go, and while the implications of that remained unclear, demonstrators shouted "Gorby save us!" – or perhaps, "Gorby, save US!". Members of the loosely coordinated protest movement had surreptitiously passed a message to groups of Western journalists on 7th October to suggest they be at Alexanderplatz that night. The job was pooled among the correspondents, some including myself going to that popular meeting place, to witness the demonstrations begin; with a staged fight, "bystanders" closing in to keep back any *Stasi* operatives, or trustees of the Party out to dissuade trouble-makers, the crowd swelling, somebody declaiming, and others proposing a march to Gorbachev's reception at the Palace of the People. (One irritated police officer offered to kick this correspondent; later the protestors were boxed in, and many arrested).

Gorbachev broke off from a visit to a war memorial to tell correspondents in the street what he had just told the politburo of the communist party, that "those who do not keep up with history will fall by the wayside". It was loosely translated among the journalists on the spot but all versions carry the same point, that he would not support the neo-Stalinist East German government on its current trajectory. It is an orthodoxy now, that he denied support to the East European governments that they needed; but it was still a new and uncertain idea at that moment.

An incident at Leipzig was learned about, and reported, though again, its full significance was not demonstrated in that week. Protests had been building up each Monday night in Leipzig, and after the "Gorby" demonstrations in the capital, the GDR President, Erich Honecker, demanded that the protest in Leipzig on 9.10.89 be put down in an exemplary way. Live ammunition was issued to troops, and while this of itself did

not portend a massacre on the model of Tienanmen Square, the situation was volatile, with the numbers of protesters growing rapidly. In the event the civil society asserted itself. The music director of the *Gewandhausorchester*, Kurt Masur, and other civic leaders, intervened with the government, as did the national security director Egon Krenz – about to remove and displace Honecker – who ordered that the protest not be molested. The casualty of the night, was *fear* among the citizens.

With the evaporation of fear, one million were in the street in East Berlin, on Saturday 4.11.89; the government gripped by paralysis could scarcely administer the state, let alone produce credible new policies; some form of resolution would have to be reached.

Announcement by Schabowski. A new communist politburo was appointed in the following days, and seeking desperately to save itself, began announcing measures that would amount to a general liberalisation. Therefore, on the night of Thursday 9.11.09, after its first meeting, the spokesperson Gunter Schabowski, announced to the world's news media, on live television, that new visas would be introduced, permitting citizens to cross the "internal" German frontier to the West. He confirmed this would apply to Berlin, i.e. crossing over the Wall. Asked when, he said immediately.

Schabowski had dropped his bombshell very late, almost as an afterthought. He might have explained the government's intention to bring in the change over a few days, more in the normal order of things, but in his confusion didn't. It is possible that his political confreres and consociates might have hesitated with the decision, had they guessed it would be presented as an "immediate" deed; though they were under very great pressure to take the action they did. A colleague in the hall had asked me: "Does this mean what I think it means?" No such doubt seemed to exist among the citizens; the meaning of the announcement was fully understood. They rushed to the frontier demanding to be let through straight away. They were going to be let through anyway, and so the gates were opened. The street party that followed was a manifestation of the mass social movement taking power, and a triumph of the human spirit.

The announcement was foreshadowed. As a significant digression here; the decision to open the frontier had been indicated in advance, among several proposed changes, as evidenced in the record of media coverage. The following is extracted from the book, *Berlin Wall in the News*:

"The welter of concessions announced and published in news media ... included promises of freer travel and ending of censorship (*see* ABC radio, 17, 21.10.09), ... amnesty for the border crossers and for protesters detained during Gorbachev's visit (*The Times* 28.10.89; *International Herald Tribune* 28-29.10.89; *Guardian Weekly* 29.10.09), ahead of removing altogether the crime of fleeing the republic (*The Australian* 3.11.89). .. Gunter Schabowski, the politburo spokesman, was foreshadowing "big changes" including an unspecified lifting of certain travel restrictions (ABC radio 9.11,89)...

“The broad range of informed opinion relayed in the news media ... stayed firm that the hastily implemented reform program would fail to meet public demands for change. Typically Wolfgang Schenck, spokesperson for the dissidents’ contact group, East-West Forum, considered only a substantial material change could modify the public mood, specifically ‘it would take a strong gesture like opening the Wall’ (ABC radio 8.11.09). .. The possibility of a passport reform was raised within a week of the change of leadership, Krenz ordering a reform of travel laws – though perhaps ‘over some years’ (*Times* 21.10.89; ABC radio 22.10.89) ... It was mentioned also in one of the first utterances of the reform-minded Hans Modrow as Prime Minister (ABC radio 20.10.09), and given out as an agenda item for a communist party politburo meeting as ‘passports for all’ (*Times* 24.10.09). *The Australian*’s correspondent, Nicholas Rothwell, wrote extensively on the announcements then being made about travel: on the foreshadowing of a plan to issue a new form of passport (*Australian* 21-22.10.89), and about citizens being urged by Krenz to await the new law ... (*Australian* 23.10.89) Reuters reported that the promised passports law was being drafted (*Australian* 26.10.89).” (Duffield 2009: 179-80)

Arrangements of governments. Politics remained to be done to clean up the situation in institutional terms; to set up for the business of government.

The United States government of the time turned out to be highly informed with a clear view of events and the resultant destiny. Its Ambassador in Bonn Vernon Walters made occasional statements in the news media predicting well the course of events – perhaps benefiting from access to both German and US intelligence. The United States early declared support for a reunited Germany within an expanded European Union. In this, it marginalised the Thatcher government in the United Kingdom, which was recalcitrant on reunification. The Secretary of State, James Baker, was instrumental with other leaders in setting up the “4+2” talks (the wartime allies and the two Germanies), to formally end the post World War II partition of Berlin.

The French President Francois Mitterrand was also President of the European Council in the latter half of 1989, and so able to speak, often, for the then European Community. He met the West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl on two or three occasions, to arrive at the famous “deal” that sanctioned Germany’s reunification in the context of a strengthened and expanded EU. The French and others would accept reunification and Germany would underwrite the Euro currency – giving up the Deutschmark.

Helmut Kohl became the man of the moment, a party politician who would only speak in German and think to be, mainly, in the right place and the right time. His Ten Point Plan just after the Wall opening outlined joint work to be done by the two German governments through commissions, in areas such as health or the environment, with no timetable. This was jettisoned just before Christmas 1989 when he was mobbed by crowds on a visit to Dresden, calling out “we are one people” -- to which he responded by including the term “fatherland” in his address. On 14.2.09 at Bonn, at a meeting with

17 GDR Ministers to discuss the collaborative commissions, the cooperation was suddenly cancelled – a development signaled by the absence of a communique. The reason: the GDR had agreed to hold free elections; polls had started to indicate an emphatic victory for Kohl's conservative political formation, and strong support for reunification; and so the politician Chancellor decided bluntly to go for that goal – electoral victory and speedy reunification.

He had made other arrangements thoroughly. Discussions had started to reassure Poland on guaranteeing the Eastern frontier. Nine days after the "Wall", on Saturday night 18.11.09 at a European Summit in Paris, then later at Strasbourg, he had cited the goal of a reunified Germany within a European framework – a European Germany, not a German Europe. He had similarly met with the US President, George H Bush, and already in August had provided financial incentives to Hungary, to open its Western frontier – repeatedly in the outcome thanking the Hungarian government for courage it displayed in following through with its undertakings. Most of this activity was transparently handled and followed prominently and accurately in reporting by media; at times business was handled more covertly, as with the visit to Bonn of the Hungarian Prime Minister Miklos Nemeth and Foreign Minister Gyula Horn to Bonn – though still picked up and reported on, a little after the event, (e.g. in the *IHT*, 26-27.8.89, 1.9.89).

German reunification and the European future. Finally on 3.10.09 Germany was officially reunified in the ceremony before the Reichstag building, with crowds gathered off the Tiergarten, waving both their German flags, and the European banner. On the night, three grand orchestras combined to present Beethoven's 9th Symphony, and that German music – the *Ode to Joy* – became the anthem of the European Union.

The five GDR states acceded to the federal republic of Germany -- the Bonn republic, West Germany – in a seamless legal move, for which its constitution had been designed. The reunified country became a part of both the NATO alliance and the European Community. The "1992" project for European expansion, with a single market, open internal borders and a single currency, was already being worked on among the member countries in 1989. In 1990, after their free elections, the new governments of Eastern Europe surprised the European Community by demanding emphatically a fast track to membership – wanting both to be distanced from the Soviet Union and to partake of the rights and prosperity of the West. Therefore, from the Berlin Wall, came reunification, and with that also, formation of the European Union as it is today – an amalgam of 27 member countries, with close to 500 million citizens and accounting for 30 % of world Gross National Product.

Reference / publications:

Duffield L, *Berlin Wall in the News: Mass media and the fall of the Eastern Bloc in Europe*, 1989, Saarbrücken, VDM.

The Australian, Nationwide News, Surry Hills, NSW; daily editions 1.8.89 – 31.1.90.

The Guardian Weekly (Manchester Guardian edition), 75 Farrington Road, London EC1M3HQ, UK; all editions 1.8.89 – 31.1.90.

The International Herald Tribune, 181 ave Charles de Gaulle, 92200 Neuilly-sur-Seine, France; daily editions 1.8.89 – 31.1.90.

The Times, Times Newspapers Limited, London; daily editions 1.8.89 – 31.1.90.

Australian Broadcasting Corporation, Ultimo, NSW. ABC Radio, news and current affairs; ABC Television news and current affairs; archive search of items by topic, 1.8.89 – 31.1.90.

Lee Richard Duffield PhD draws on a long background in news media and public affairs, writing as an academic on Journalism education, mass media and Europe, and development communication in the Asia Pacific. A journalist for more than twenty years with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, he was the first news editor on the Triple-Jay youth network and was European Correspondent at the time of the opening of the Berlin Wall. He is a former Deputy Director of Ministerial Media and a senior media adviser in the Queensland Government, and for a short time was Public Affairs Officer at the Australian High Commission in New Zealand. A full-time academic since 1997, Lee Duffield is a Senior Lecturer in Journalism at the Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane. He edits the online publication euastralia.com, is principal editor of the text *I, Journalist* (2006) and author of a monograph, *Berlin Wall in the News*.